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Members of the assembly of the synod on synodality start a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 18, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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One of my dear friends was an elementary teacher for some 45 years. She loved to march her second graders around the neighborhood like a pied piper. She knew how to calm the wildest child, attend to the frightened and help the dyslexic read.

One day, a little guy in third grade had gone wild — to the point of trying to throw a desk. The teacher brought him to the office and called for Sister Mary Kay. When she appeared at the office door, the little fellow looked at her with wide eyes and started imploring, "Please, Sister, NO! Don't do it! PLEASE!"

In spite of his tearful pleading, she looked him straight in the eyes and slowly walked toward him. She took his head firmly in both hands and kissed him on the forehead. With that, the child began to weep, and she held him until he calmed down. He had known that the minute she reminded him of how much he was loved, his fury would fizzle.

Today, Isaiah tells us that God comes with vindication. What a word! It sounds like God will smite the evildoers and trounce the oppressors.

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Isaiah 35:4-7a

Psalm 146

James 2:1-5

Mark 7:31-37

But, no, Isaiah tells us that God the vindicator looks more like Sister Mary Kay than like a warrior. God's recompense heals rather than being destructive. When God is reigning, the blind will see, the deaf hear, the lame will dance and the mute will sing (probably in four-part harmony). Drought will be history and deserts will flower.

Today's Gospel lets us watch Jesus attend to a deaf man. How did this man's friends let him know that they wanted to bring him to Jesus? Their own language was useless because the man could neither hear nor speak.

Over time, he and his friends must have worked out a system of signs, ways to turn their thoughts into gestures that both sides could understand. In essence, when faced with very significant differences, they had to invent a new language that both could understand. The deaf man had to enter the world of symbolic communication and the hearing had to go beyond their accustomed ways of relating to others.

Seeing all that had already happened among them, Jesus took the man aside and finished the job. He opened the man's ears. Now that he could hear others, he could imitate their pronunciation and communicate like they did. The man and his friends were now bilingual, able to connect in different ways.

Our reading from the Letter of St. James reflects on this process. Knowing that his community could be impressed by showiness, he warns them not to fall for the apparent value of glitz and power lest they lose touch with God and their divine mission.

God is thoroughly unimpressed by academic degrees, bank accounts or any other kind of stardom. Those who overvalue those things have planted their feet at the very edges of the circle of God's love — a love no one can earn. Unlike the deaf man's friends who stood in solidarity, they are likely to thank God for not being frail without realizing that their distorted value system is a more debilitating impairment than that of those from whom they stand apart ([Luke 18:9-14](#)).

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These readings are uniquely appropriate right now. We are living amid divisions in our country unlike anything our society has seen during the past 150 years. At the same time, our church is moving toward the second session of the [synod on synodality](#). If we are looking for divine recompense, our responsibility to bring it about could hardly be more obvious.

The synodal way offers a difficult and effective antidote to our divisiveness. Imitating the deaf man and his friends, synodality invites us to learn new ways of communicating — ways that allow everyone to have their say.

The synod invites us to escape our deafness through contemplative dialogue — a way of listening that genuinely expects to learn something new, listening that opens us to broader ways of thinking. It's a way of listening that avoids debate and the false belief that there is only one way to understand the truth.

Synodality would delight St. James for its respect for each point of view, realizing that the woman who cleans the office, the Monsignor, the plumber, the academic and the executive all have much to offer one another.

Our world is in desperate need of listeners, of people who can approach the violent with a kiss and who can receive revelation from very different points of view. God has instigated a plan to open our ears and to form us as agents of divine recompense. Are we willing, like Jesus and the deaf man's friends, to lead our world toward the healing we need?

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